

## Advanced Fellowship Award 2025 Chair's report

### Chairs:

Chair: Professor Deb Fitzsimmons, Professor of Health Economics and Outcomes Research, Swansea University, and Co-Director, Health and Care Economics Cymru

Deputy Chair: Professor Monica Busse, Chartered physiotherapist, Trials methodologist at Centre for Trials Research (CTR), Cardiff University and Director of Health and Care Research Wales Faculty

### Panel:

Zoe Hoare - Principle Statistician and Director, Bangor University

Victoria Shepherd - Senior Research Fellow (Nurse), Cardiff University

Richard Stanton - Professor of Virology, Cardiff University

Gina Dolan - Associate Dean – Research and Innovation, University of South Wales

Claudia Metzler-Baddeley - Reader and Research Fellow, Cardiff University

Reyer Zwiggelaar - Head of Graduate School, Aberystwyth University

Ashley Akbari - Professor of Population Data and Science Research, Swansea University Medical School

Fiona Wood - Professor of Medical Sociology, Cardiff University

Diane Seddon - Reader in Social Care, Bangor University

Nathan Davies - Public Member

### Introduction

Health and Care Research Wales' mission is to promote, support and provide collective oversight of health and social care research in Wales to ensure it is of the highest international scientific quality, is relevant to the needs and challenges of health and social care in Wales, and makes a difference to policy and practice in ways that improve the lives of patients, people and communities in Wales.

The **Advanced Fellowship Award** aims to support individuals to become independent researchers through leading and undertaking high-quality research.

The Advanced Fellowship is an individual training award which offers funding for salary costs of the individual for up to three years' full-time funding, or four-, five- or six years' part-time funding, and the costs of an appropriate research project and training and development programme.

The number of applications received, and awards made for the 2025 competition were:

**Applied:** 19

**Eligible:** 19

**Awarded:** 4

## Advanced Fellowship Awards

The scheme launched on 17 October 2024 and closed on 15 January 2025.

### Observations and advice for prospective applicants

The Chair and Deputy Chair of the panel have made observations of the general strengths and weaknesses of the eligible applications and discussed areas that future applicants should consider to strengthen their application. These are summarised below.

Research ambition  
Mentorship and host organisation support  
Public Involvement and budget  
Methodology  
Training and development plan  
Confirmation of access to facilities and data  
Research expertise and infrastructure in Wales

### Research ambition

The panel were pleased to see high levels of motivation and ambition to pursue research careers in their chosen field, in Wales. The panel noted that many

applicants demonstrated commitment to their professional roles (e.g. request of part-time awards).

Stronger applications provided convincing and well-articulated of understanding how their fellowship would deliver high-quality research of benefit to Wales.

Weaker applications did not provide sufficient detail of the relevance and the potential impact of their research.

Applicants should ensure that in choosing this fellowship route they have considered this is the best trajectory for them at this stage of their career to achieve their ambitions. The panel would like to see that the candidate demonstrates ownership of their fellowship research with sufficient novelty/innovation. The research should demonstrate clear progression from their previous research e.g. PhD.

Applicants are reminded that this is not a project grant and there must be clear and coherent linkage in how their research project and place chosen to undertake the fellowship links with their proposed training plans and career development.

### **Mentorship and host organisation support**

The panel reminds applicants of the importance of justifying the mentorship team and host organisation for the research and that the statements provided by the mentors and host are carefully scrutinised by the panel.

Whilst the panel recognises that applicants will justify, they are already working in the highest quality research environment, the panel must be reassured the mentorship in place will support the fellowship e.g. providing coaching and support for new approaches and/or use to develop new national/international networks. Stronger applications considered the importance of breadth and depth of the support needed, in justifying the choice of mentors, which could include additional mentors outside of Wales/UK. Strong mentorship was observed in statements where the mentor demonstrated good insight into the candidate's ambitions and articulated the benefit of the applicant and their research to the organisation

Weaker applications failed to provide sufficient reassurance of the level of support needed to enable the applicant to deliver a successful fellowship and/or did not provide sufficient information how the commitment to the candidate would be extended beyond conducting the research project in developing their research independence.

### **Public Involvement (PI) and budget**

Embedding the PI element of proposed research continues to be a top priority for Health and Care Research Wales. Whilst we are seeing increased awareness of the importance of PI the panel were disappointed to observe limited budgets for PI in a number of applications.

Applicants are reminded that Health and Care Research Wales takes PI very seriously and expect to see PI activities remunerated at recommended rates. It is crucial to demonstrate early PI in the development of your research proposal. PI is one of the assessment criteria used by the panel when reviewing all applications and PI members sit on the interview panels.

## Methodology

The methodological approach needs to be very carefully considered and should be appropriate for the research being undertaken. It is vital that the research proposed is backed up by sound research methods that the applicant can independently justify. The panel would like to see applicants proposing innovative methodological approaches to their research. If an applicant doesn't have the required expertise in the research methods they are proposing in their application, the panel will expect to see specific training as part of the training and development programme, and relevant support in the form of a suitable mentor or advisor and justified as crucial to the applicant's development and next steps towards research independence.

## The importance of the training and development plan

Applicants are expected to take advantage of the fellowship to further develop in areas which will contribute to their development as a researcher and progress to the next stage in their research career. Whilst improved from last year, weaknesses were still evident, particularly in the alignment and lack of detail in the training and development plan.

## Confirmation of access to facilities and data, if successful

Applicants are reminded that the feasibility of conducting the proposed research is an important consideration in mitigating risk. Applicants should seek letters of support from all organisations cited in the research proposal detailing their commitment to support the research, if funded. The panel were disappointed by a lack of supporting evidence and the level of detail contained in these letters, when supplied. A noted observation was in some applications who had indicated they would access routine data (such as SAIL) but provided insufficient detail or costs. Similar concerns were raised for some laboratory-based studies in detailing and justifying the resources required. In some cases, the panel were disappointed that

there was a lack of clarity on the research to be conducted for the fellowship award and ongoing/overlapping studies and trials.

We encourage all applicants to discuss the proposed research with supporting organisations and to provide a formal and detailed signed letter of support from each organisation.

### Research expertise and infrastructure in Wales

The context of the proposed research within existing research infrastructure in Wales should be considered. Applicants should have an awareness of existing research groups and infrastructure that aligns with their research and be able to envisage the positioning of their contribution, should the project be funded. Applicants should consider the benefit to them in becoming involved within the Health and Care Research Wales Faculty and how they will engage with the community and fellow peers and act as an ambassador for the Faculty across the UK and beyond.

### Useful resources for prospective applicants

Scheme Guidance is available on the Health and Care Research Wales website. This provides details of the eligibility and assessment criteria and should be read in full before starting an application.

Note that updated Scheme Guidance will be published with the launch of each call and applicants must ensure that they are referring to the most recent Scheme Guidance.

Current and previous Health and Care Research Wales award holders are listed on the website and may be a useful resource.

There are also a range of resources available on our website including upcoming and recorded health and social care webinars.